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Will China Use Force Against Taiwan?

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During his August 1999 state visit to Australia, China's President Jiang Zemin reaffirmed once again that it was "the hope of the [People's Republic of China-PRC] government to realize the reunification of China through peaceful means but it does not undertake to give up the use of force."¹ Under his leadership, the reunification of the British colony of Hong Kong had taken place in June 1997, followed by the Portuguese colony of Macao in December 1999, leaving only Beijing's claim to the island of Taiwan. The threat to use military force – even as a last resort – to retake the island has been constant since the Chinese communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) under Mao Zedong seized the mainland in 1949, forcing the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party-KMT) government forces under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to flee to Taiwan.

But Jiang's reaffirmation of the willingness of his PRC government to use military force became a cause for international concern as it was in direct response to Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui's earlier redefining of the island's status as "a separate state but not an independent country" from China.² Lee's public declarations of a change from a mutual acceptance of a "One China" policy to a *de facto* recognition of a "Two Chinas" policy led to an immediate escalation of cross straits

tensions as China made vigorous efforts to pressure Lee and his KMT government to step back from what Beijing considers to be "one step short of declaring independence" for the island. These efforts ranged from Chinese leaders' warnings of "dire consequences" to state-controlled media rhetoric denouncing Lee as a "splitist" [separatist] to conducting threatening coastal military exercises by PLA air and naval units. The tense relations between China and Taiwan have again made the Taiwan Straits into a global flash point.³

In the coming months and years, is China likely to attack Taiwan? If a China-Taiwan military confrontation is likely, what will be the magnitude of it? And finally, what are the potential implications of such a conflict for the East Asian region as well as the international community?

The View from Beijing: 50 Years of Waiting for Reunification

Reuniting Taiwan (and Hong Kong and Macao) with China has been a policy imperative for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since it seized power in 1949. While the colonial enclaves of Britain and Portugal on China's eastern coastline had negotiated dates for their return – though PLA forces could have overrun them at any time as India did to the Portuguese colony of Goa in 1961 – Taiwan has been protected from the PLA armies on the mainland by well-armed KMT forces on the island

and a few small islets along the Chinese coastline, by the periodic intervention of American naval forces in the East China Sea, and, perhaps most importantly, by over 150 km of open waters and rapidly changing weather conditions in the Taiwan Straits.

In addition to being a historic Party goal, the reunification of China has become an integral part of the CCP's own political legitimacy in the 1990s. Since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the Beijing leadership has mounted a patriotic mobilization campaign to regain popular support for the Communist Party by shifting the basis of its political legitimacy from an increasingly questionable ideology to a "Greater China" nationalism.⁴ "Patriotism" has been included as one of the four words to symbolize China's key mobilization goals along with "development", "democracy" and "science." In the decades since the 1910 Chinese Revolution, the CCP (like the KMT) has claimed to be the "standard bearer" of Chinese nationalism and against foreign military intervention in the "motherland of China." In the 1990s, the party leaders, under the watchword of patriotism, have called upon Chinese nationalist fervour "to guarantee the security of China" and "to ensure that the reunification of China" is completed. But "ethnic separatism" in Tibet and the western province of Sinkiang as well as "splitism" in Taiwan have become overriding worries for communist leaders, such that, during the PRC's 50th anniversary

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celebrations, Jiang publicly pledged "to crush ethnic separatism and splitism."⁵

View from Taipei: 50 Years of Waiting for T-Day

In the half-century since the KMT fled to the island, Taiwan has become a highly-politicized society with a high-tech export economy, even while living under the seemingly-permanent threat of invasion by PLA assault troops, warships and aircraft from the mainland – the so-called "T-Day." During the first four decades, the authoritarian KMT leadership claimed to be the legitimate government of "all of China," and promised to reclaim the mainland while maintaining martial law on the island until 1986. In 1950, the PLA intervened on the side of communist North Korea in the Korean War. In 1958, PLA artillery units bombarded the KMT-held Quemoy-Matsu island groups off the Chinese coastline. Each time Taiwanese defence planners saw these military actions as a prelude for a PLA invasion of Taiwan. But in each case the American government ordered US naval forces into the Taiwan Straits and the threatened Chinese military confrontation dissipated. While still preparing for "T-Day," the KMT government in 1991 ended any future planning to militarily intervene on the mainland as it acknowledged its political rule only over Taiwan and a few islets. Consistent with this stance, Taiwan adopted its current strategic doctrine of "defensive deterrence" over the control of the air and sea approaches to the island.

To dampen pro-independence forces during Taiwan's first democratic elections in March 1996, China began "testing" its immediate-range missiles into the international waters near the northern and southern ports on the island. In response, President Bill Clinton ordered two US aircraft carrier battle groups into the East China Sea around Taiwan. According to Taiwan Defence Minister Tang Fei, China was ready during the 1996 crisis to attack one of the Taiwan-held islets in the straits in a limited show of force "if weather had permitted."⁶ The crisis ended after the Taiwanese voters elected President Lee – the first Taiwan-born KMT president on the island. The following year he announced that Taiwan would not reunify with China

until the mainland adopted a democratic political system.

China-Taiwan Arms Build-up

During the 1990s, the Asian region as a whole experienced an escalation in the pace of military equipment acquisition. But due to the 1997 regional financial crisis, most national governments were subsequently forced to restrict their military purchases. China and Taiwan, however, continued to make major purchases. Because they did not suffer the financial meltdown experienced by other Asian countries, they were able to continue their respective military modernizations with the purchase of state-of-the-art weapons systems from the Russian Federation (by China) and from the United States and France (by Taiwan). Taiwan's reason for its arms build-up is to ensure that it has a credible high-tech conventional capacity with which to deter the PLA forces from any attempt to seize the island.

On the other hand, China's military modernization is intended to ensure the ultimate reunification of Taiwan with the mainland as well as to give the Beijing leadership the military capacity to deter any foreign interference in Chinese "internal affairs." To accomplish these tasks, Chinese military planning has been seeking to modernize the PLA to be able to fight a local conflict "under high-tech condi-

tions." The successes of the local high-tech conflicts against Iraq in 1991 and against the Former Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999 have been prime examples of what Western military attacks can do to a country which lacks "weapons of deterrence," such as ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

Recent Chinese acquisitions can be interpreted as responses to Taipei's perceived advantages in key areas such as air defence and naval surface warfare. The PLA has purchased dozens of Russian SU-27/30 long-range naval strike aircraft and additional ones may yet be built under license in China. With Israeli assistance, it has attempted to modernize its airborne early warning and control systems capability. Meanwhile, the acquisition of two Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class destroyers will not only enhance the PLA naval air defence capabilities, but the ships' SS-N-22 *Sunburn* anti-ship missiles will out-range any comparable systems in Taiwan's — or Washington's — inventory. Beijing's new "super-quiet" *Kilo*-class submarines could also be of use even in a limited confrontation with Taiwan. The mine-laying capability of these Russian conventional submarines could put the island's ports out of service for extended periods of time, causing economic upheaval throughout the region.

These carefully-focused acquisition programs indicate a trend toward increased strategic defence-industrial

	CHINA	TAIWAN
Armed Forces	2.48 million (est.)	376,000 (est.)
Main Battle Tanks	8,300	719
Warships	53	37
Diesel Submarines	65	4
Nuclear Submarines	6	0
Combat Aircraft	3,520	598
Medium-range Missiles	150-200	0
Anti-Missile Batteries	0	6

SOURCE: *Military Balance 1999-2000* (London: IISS, Autumn 1999)

co-operation between Russia and China. At the very least, they show that Chinese naval shipyards and arms factories cannot yet produce the hi-tech weaponry that the PLA feels it needs to project influence in the region. There have also been reports that Beijing may be allowed to use Russia's satellite-based global positioning system (GPS), which could dramatically increase the accuracy of the PLA's surface-to-surface missiles and the operational co-ordination of its naval units. But such hi-tech upgrades will likely only pressure Taipei to increase its own efforts to persuade the United States to sell it AEGIS anti-missile destroyers as well as to permit Taiwan to come within the proposed US-Japan theatre anti-missile system in East Asia.⁷

The American Factor

American and Chinese military forces almost came to blows during the 1996 cross-straits missile crisis. Despite China's ICBM and nuclear warhead development, as well as its purchases of Russian hi-tech weapons systems, "the greatest threat China poses to the United States has always been a distant one," namely that a Chinese attack or naval blockade on Taiwan would destabilize Asia and pull American forces into a regional war.⁸ Even a limited clash between an American aircraft carrier battle group and Chinese naval vessels and land-based aircraft could result in major damage and loss of life – particularly if anti-ship missiles were used, as they were to great effect during the 1982 British-Argentine conflict over the Falklands Islands. To prevent an accidental naval encounter, China and the United States signed a maritime consultation agreement in 1998.

In July 1999, the Chinese government acknowledged that it had designed miniaturized nuclear warheads as well as an enhanced radiation weapon – the so-called neutron bomb – which can kill unprotected people without destroying buildings or equipment. At the time, there were media suggestions that the released information was targeted at Taiwan's leadership. Nevertheless, the information could equally have been aimed at American leaders and naval commanders to show that China had deterrent weapons for use in any local high-tech conflict, including

one against US naval units sent into the area during a future crisis.

Fearful of being drawn incrementally into a local confrontation with China, the United States has consistently sustained a policy of "strategic ambiguity" as to whether American armed forces would help defend Taiwan in the case of an actual Chinese invasion, even while selling Taiwan advanced "defensive" weapons systems. The Clinton White House has been anxious not to upset the delicate balance between China and Taiwan and has refused to support a "Two China" policy or to support Taiwan's sovereignty or membership in the United Nations. Even so, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji was quoted as stating emphatically to foreign business leaders that "sooner or later [American support of Taiwan] will lead to an armed resolution of the Taiwan question, because the Chinese people will become impatient."⁹

Global Impact of a Regional Conflict

A regional military confrontation in the East China Sea would immediately disrupt international shipping, especially petroleum shipments and air traffic through these waters. Such a local conflict would disrupt the export trade of both China and Taiwan – cutting off China's efforts to encourage Western investment and technology transfer while at the same time undercutting Taiwan's worldwide supply of computer components. Should the conflict spread, the Chinese mainland could come under attack, particularly the PLA military air bases and missile facilities in the coastal province of Fujian which faces Taiwan, as well as military bases near Shanghai and Hong Kong. This raises the possibility of environmental disaster resulting from military strikes against Taiwanese as well as mainland power supplies, particularly operational nuclear power reactors and major fuel storage facilities.

China's Military Options

Following the end of the Cold War in 1990, China's then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, reportedly laid down five conditions that would prompt Beijing to attack Taiwan. These included a Taiwan-Russia entente, the outbreak of extreme civil disorder in Taiwan, the

development of a Taiwan atomic bomb, a formal declaration of independence by Taiwan, and/or the rejection of unification for a long time.¹⁰ At present, only the latter two conditions – and the unlikely restart of Taiwan's nuclear weapons development programme of the 1970s – remain realistic possibilities. Even so, there are growing pressures on Beijing to "reunite Taiwan with the China motherland," even if by force.

In addition to political and media pressures, the Chinese leadership has a range of military options to resolve the current impasse. These could include a nuclear attack on Taiwan's defence infrastructure; a conventional air assault by fighter-bombers; intermediate-range missiles and cruise missiles; a major amphibious invasion; a blockade by submarines, aircraft and cruise missiles; a limited conventional strike against the small Taiwan-held islets; a local uprising by agents provocateur; or even an information warfare strike against the island's computer and electronic infrastructure.

Most of these appear to be unlikely options. First, while China possesses the capacity to use nuclear weapons against Taiwan, it has pledged *not* to use nuclear weapons against Taiwan in line with its previously declared "no first use" of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries or regions. Similarly, most military analyses consider a massive air and sea assault on Taiwan highly unlikely due to the PLA's mostly 1960s-generation arsenal, as well as its lack of adequate naval transport craft and amphibious equipment for a cross-straits invasion. Nevertheless, the government-controlled *China Business Times News Weekly* has boasted that Taiwan's "Nationalist [KMT] army" could not resist more than five days "once war breaks out."¹¹

It is also thought unlikely that China could instigate a local uprising, despite an estimated 12,000 Chinese agents being on the island, according to a 1998 report by Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB). But the Taiwanese authorities have stated that they would declare martial law if violence broke out during the March 2000 presidential election. Meanwhile, Chinese and Taiwanese computer hackers have "attacked" each other's websites during the current crisis, although without inflicting any significant damage.

Will China Use force against Taiwan?

During his February 1998 visit to Japan, Chinese Defence Minister General Chi Haotian stated that the "core essence" of his country's national defence policy was "to safeguard China's independent sovereignty, reunification and security."¹² The current leadership group around President Jiang has placed major emphasis on re-integrating the "renegade" province of Taiwan into mainland China. If it believed that more "sabre-rattling" — using missiles, aircraft, or submarines — could pressure Taiwan into unity talks, the Beijing leadership would seem to be prepared to act. Similarly, other shows of force like aggressive combat patrols by PLA aircraft or naval units in the Taiwan Straits, a limited PLA naval blockage of Taiwan's main seaports, or even a PLA seizure of Taiwan-held islets along the Chinese coastline and in the East China Sea are likely if the Beijing leadership comes to conclude that such actions will hasten the ultimate reintegration of China.

Many of the current Communist Party and military leaders are advanced in years and wish to reunite Taiwan before their posts have to be renewed by the National People's Congress (NPC) at the end of their current five-year tenure in 2003. The NPC must approve all senior government posts as well as the seats on the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC), which sets military policy and controls the PLA. According to a 1999 CMC circular published in the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the CMC under the chairmanship of President Jiang reaffirmed that the PLA was "under the absolute leadership of the Party."¹³ In a further step to maintain party direction over the PLA, Jiang has reportedly created a special high-level group composed of many but not all of the CMC members.¹⁴ This senior control group is thought to have been created to ensure a direct chain of command in case the PLA has to employ force against Taiwan. It could also be seen to further ensure CPP control over senior PLA

commanders to prevent any unauthorized military action.

Since the beginning of the current round of tensions, leaders on both sides of the straits have declared that their willingness to re-start cross straits talks, but only on their own terms. Jiang has declared that the Chinese authorities are ready to discuss any issues provided Taiwan returns to a "One China" policy, while Lee has repeatedly stated that the preconditions for reunification with the mainland must be "parity" [state-to-state] between Taiwan and China as well as greater political freedom in China. At present, neither side is prepared to drop their preconditions and there is little prospect that either will — at least until after the Taiwanese presidential election. Nevertheless, Ting Yu-chou, Taiwan NSB director-general, has predicted that China will make a concerted effort after the presidential election to pressure the new Taipei government into talks on its terms, even while it agrees to accept direct trade, shipping and postal links with Taiwan. At the same time — in what Ting called the "worst case scenario" — Beijing would continue to prepare to attack the island.¹⁵

The accomplishment of Taiwan's reunification has become a "Beijing imperative" amongst senior Chinese leaders. In the months and years ahead — at least until the next five-year NPC elections in 2003 or later — the pressure on Jiang and senior party and military leaders will grow to take some determined and forceful action. A local show of force, or a political miscalculation leading to fighting, could quickly escalate into a military confrontation between China and Taiwan. And such a regional military conflict in East Asia would in all likelihood draw in the United States, and other Pacific Rim countries.¹⁶

Notes

¹ "Interview with Chinese President Jiang Zemin," *The Australian* (31 August 1999).

² Lee Teng-hui, "Understanding Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 6 (November-December 1999): 9-14.

³ Robert D'A. Henderson, "Continuing Tensions in the Taiwan Straits," *CISS Strategic Datalink* #85, January 2000.

⁴ Maria Hsia Chang, "Chinese Irredentist Nationalism," *Comparative Strategy* (January-February 1998): 83-100.

⁵ Agence France Presse news report, Beijing, 30 September 1999

⁶ Agence France Presse news report, Taipei, 8 May 1999.

⁷ John Pomfret, "Russians Help China Modernize its Arsenal," *Washington Post*, 10 February 2000, A17.

⁸ Barton Gellman, "US and China nearly came to blows in 1996," *Washington Post*, 21 June 1998 and Patrick Tyler, "Who's afraid of China?" *New York Times Magazine*, 1 August 1999.

⁹ Reuters news report, Beijing, 30 September 1999.

¹⁰ Todd Crowell, "Who will hold the power in Asia," *Asiaweek* (20-27 August 1999): 52.

¹¹ *China Business Times News Weekly* (11 August 1999).

¹² Xinhua News Agency report, Tokyo, 4 February 1998.

¹³ Agence France Presse news report, Beijing, 1 September 1999.

¹⁴ *Ming Pao Daily News*, Hong Kong, 18 September 1999.

¹⁵ Reuters news report, Taipei, 27 January 2000.

¹⁶ For a Year 2004 scenario of a China-United States war over Taiwan, see Richard Bernstein & Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 186-202.



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